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CONSERVATION

MINK UPDATE

The Scottish Mink Initiative (SMI) is focused in north Scotland and the Highlands [May 11]. It aims to protect nationally significant populations of water voles, salmonids, ground-nesting birds, and other riparian biodiversity by establishing a sustainable management framework to create and maintain an area free of breeding mink in northern Scotland.

Professor Xavier Lambin, of Aberdeen University, said: "Vast swathes of the project area have not had resident mink impacting the native fauna for months or years in some places. This is a huge success and the start of a gradual restoration process of riparian ecosystems. There is already some evidence that water voles, one of the species most severely affected by American mink, have started reclaiming their former range. While for now recolonisation of water voles is restricted to those places that could be reached by colonists spreading from a few hilltop strongholds which escaped mink predation (such as in upper Donside and Deeside where spectacular recoveries have taken place), the process of re-colonisation and restoration of the ecosystem will gather pace as an increasing fraction of the vast amount of suitable but empty habitat will become within reach of recolonists dispersing in a stepping stone manner. As the project continues, we expect that species that have been absent will again become part of riparian ecosystem and the efforts of so many volunteers will be rewarded."

SMI comprises Rivers & Fisheries Trusts of Scotland; the Scottish Wildlife Trust; the University of Aberdeen; Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH); Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) and 13 other organisations.

The project is now in its second phase; mink monitoring rafts and volunteer networks are coordinated by local fisheries trusts.

SPARROWS

Glasgow University, in conjunction with RSPB Scotland, is running a project to find where sparrows nest in Glasgow, and how many are left. Recent estimates show that the number of sparrows in Glasgow may have fallen by as much as 90% since the 1970s. Volunteers will count the sparrows in their area and help identify areas where the birds are thriving. The project is expected to run for two years and counts will be taken in winter and during the breeding season.

Contact: *RSPB Scotland, telephone: 0141 331 0993; email: glasgow@rspb.org.uk*



FARMING

STARTER FARMS

Forestry Commission (FC) Scotland is to create its first Highland starter farm on 340 acres at Achnamoine, near Halkirk, Caithness. The other seven FC Scotland starter farms are in Fife, Ayrshire, Stirlingshire, Aberdeenshire and Dumfriesshire. They give new farmers an opportunity to get their first foothold in the industry and are part of FC Scotland's repositioning programme; areas of un-needed land are sold and then the proceeds used to buy new areas of land. A ten year lease is awarded.

WINTER HARVEST

Scotland's chief statistician has released the latest results from the December Agricultural Survey. The area of winter-sown crops in December 2013 was up 12% on the previous December, with 20,000 hectares more wheat and a thousand hectares more oilseed rape and oats. The area of winter barley remained fairly similar to 2012, but most barley is sown in the spring. These increases bring the total winter crop area back to levels last seen in 2010.

There were decreases in each of the four main categories of livestock, sheep (down 3%), cattle (down 2%), pigs (down 9%) and poultry (down 6%), though there was a 2% increase in the number of dairy cattle. The amount of hay, grass silage and arable silage all saw increases in 2013. See: www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins/01091

CAP REFORM

Patrick Krause, of the Scottish Crofting Federation (SCF), commenting on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform consultation [Feb 14] said: "In the direct payments consultation, the Scottish Government is proposing the pitiful rate of 20 to 25 euros per hectare for rough grazing land, where some of the world's most unique and prized landscape is to be found. We are very surprised and dismayed to see this figure. Over 60% of land in Scotland that is supported by the CAP is rough grazing and it is this type of land that crofters manage in remote and fragile areas.

"It is being suggested that holdings on higher quality agricultural land get ten times this amount. In other words, the proposal is that less than 40% of agricultural land should take from 85 to 90% of the budget. There is no doubt that the pot is limited, but the conclusion one must draw is that the Scottish Government is prepared to allocate it in a way that keeps the farms on better land happy and crofters take the hit.

"It is not clear where these figures have come from. The modelling that the James Hutton Institute did to inform the debate on CAP reform suggested that a figure of 27 euros per hectare would enable more crofters to 'win' from the reform, than lose from it ... But it is clear that to go below the 30 euros per hectare requested by SCF would mean crofters livelihoods will be endangered, potentially leading to further land abandonment."

SCOTTISH PLANT HEALTH

A Scottish Plant Health Strategy has been announced by the Scottish Government. The spread of plant health threats has been exacerbated by aspects of globalisation and climate change. Those sectors exposed to plant health threats – agriculture, horticulture and forestry – are worth a combined £1.6 billion annually to the economy.



WOODLANDS

TRACK A TREE

Edinburgh University is recruiting volunteers to monitor the impact of climate change on particular trees and plants in woodland around Scotland. The project, Track a Tree, will take place over this spring and next. The team hopes

to identify how warming springs are affecting the seasonal timing of different woodland species; some species may fare better at the expense of others. The initiative is a sister project of The Woodland Trust's Nature's Calendar, which records the seasonal timing of a range of British wildlife. See: www.trackatree.org.uk

FOREST ESTATE

Forestry Commission Scotland is conducting a three-month public consultation into the management of Scotland's National Forest Estate over the next three years.

The priorities and management principles set out in ten District Strategic Plans (2014-2017) will subsequently guide the landscape-scale management plans for all of the forest estate.

Contact: *District Strategic Plans Consultation Coordinator, Forest Enterprise Scotland Head Office, 1 Highlander Way, Inverness Business Park, Inverness, IV2 7GB; telephone: 01463 232811; email: fes.dsp@forestry.gsi.gov.uk* See: www.forestry.gov.uk/fesplans

EDINBURGH TREES

The Herald reported that Edinburgh City Council and the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh (RBGE) have signed a five year memorandum of understanding to conserve endangered tree species around the city, as part of the RBGE's International Conifer Conservation Programme.

Launched in 1991, the programme combines horticultural research with conifer conservation. The council has established a new tree nursery at its Inch Nursery, where conifers and other internationally collected tree samples supplied by RBGE will be grown, before being planted in public parks and gardens and increasing the species diversity across the city.

RBGE will also collect cuttings from the city's rare elm collection, as well as heritage and veteran trees throughout sites across the city, which will be cultivated to preserve the city's nationally important elm and genetic tree resource.

TREE PLANTING

The Herald's farming column reported that farmers, landowners and smallholders are being offered increased funding from the Woodland Trust (WT) Scotland to plant trees, amidst uncertainty over the availability of funding for tree planting through the Scottish Rural Development Programme. New areas of native woodland, cover strips, shelter belts and hedgerows linking existing woods are eligible; planting trees does not have to involve losing productive land.

The trust can fund up to 60% of the cost of the trees, for projects with a minimum size of 0.5 hectares and a planting density of between 1,000 and 1,600 trees per hectare. Funding is available for a minimum of 100 metres of hedging, and a maximum of 250 metres of hedgerow without additional woodland creation, all subject to a 750 metre maximum on any one scheme. These new hedgerows must link existing areas of woodland and only the hedgerow plants will be funded.

FOREST LAND SCHEME

Creteown Initiative Ltd has applied to the National Forest Land Scheme (NFLS) to lease an area of land within Balloch Wood in Galloway Forest District amounting to approximately 1.2 hectares. The initiative wants to install a run-of-river hydro electric scheme on Balloch Burn.

• Achnacarry, Bunarkaig & Clunes (ABC) Group has applied to the NFLS to purchase 1,086 hectares at Glen Mallie and South Loch Arkaig in Lochaber. These woodlands contain native pinewood remnants which the group aims to restore. See both applications on: www.forestry.gov.uk/nfls

JUNIPER

Plantlife Scotland has asked walkers to record sightings of juniper bushes to help track juniper numbers and the spread of a fungal disease, *Phytophthora austrocedrae*, which affects the berries. The fungus has eradicated juniper from a quarter of sites within the UK; orange or brown bushes could indicate infection.

See: www.plantlife.org.uk/scotland/campaigns/savingjuniperscotland/

WAR CENTENARY WOODS

The Woodland Trust, in partnership with Sainsbury's, is to mark the centenary of the First World War by creating four new woodlands, one each in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The woodlands will total 1,000 acres.

The site for the wood in Scotland has been identified, but will not be revealed until later in the year. The first trees will be planted this autumn and the project will run until 2018.

ESKDALEMUIR

Confor commissioned a report, *Eskdalemuir: A comparison of forestry and hill farming; productivity and economic impact*, from Julian Bell of SAC Consulting. The report indicated that established, productive conifer forestry in Dumfries & Galloway has a greater economic output – an average of just over £10m a year when in sustained forestry production, compared to just over £3m for farming. The annual output per hectare is £503 for forestry and £154 for sheep farming. Upland sheep farming requires a public subsidy of £22,600 per full time equivalent employee each year to survive. Forestry receives a subsidy of around one sixth of that which goes towards public benefits such as access, recreational opportunities and environmental improvements.

Confor said that the report provided evidence of the real social and economic justification behind the ambitions of the Scottish Government to create a further 60,000 hectares of this forest type over the next ten years. Confor said that the report did not conclude that all hills should be covered with new forests and that it wasn't denigrating upland farming. However, it highlights a major opportunity for farmers to plant trees, against a backdrop of downward pressure on EU Common Agricultural Policy subsidies.

See: www.confor.org.uk/Upload/Documents/33_EskdalemuirReportMarch2014.pdf

KINVEACHY FOREST

The *Strathspey & Badenoch Herald* reported that Scottish Natural Heritage said that the Kinveachy Forest regeneration project on Reidhaven Estate shows 'excellent signs of achievement.' Deer numbers have been reduced, since 2005, from around 18 to about four per square kilometre; there has been widespread regeneration of Scots pine. Browsing rates fell from 80% to 47% between 2006 to 2013.

2,849 hectares of Kinveachy Moor are designated as a Special Protection Area for Scottish crossbill and capercaillie; the area is also a Special Area of Conservation for its Caledonian pine woodland and bog woodland habitats. Kinveachy Forest is a Site of Special Scientific Interest for its native pine woodland and breeding bird assemblage.



FISHERIES & FISHFARMING

SEA-LICE

The *ForArgyll* website reported that the latest aggregated sea-lice data, published by the Scottish

Salmon Producers Organisation [SSPO], shows that in the fourth quarter of 2013 sea-lice numbers on farmed salmon were over thresholds in 13 out of 30 areas for which data is reported by the industry [Oct 13].

A particular hotspot was between Kennart and Gruinard in Wester Ross, where there are seven farms operated by two companies, Wester Ross Fisheries Ltd and Scottish Sea Farms Ltd. The monthly lice count on farms in this area was between five and ten times the threshold between October and December last year. Lice have been over the threshold in this area for a year, despite three area-wide treatments and 25 other treatments for lice. Other areas with severe lice problems detailed in this report include Badachro to Applecross [Wester Ross], Awe and Nell [Argyll] and Add and Ormsary [also Argyll]. Mull, Islay and Jura and east coast of Lewis, North Uist and South Uist also had sea-lice levels over the thresholds for treatment.

Hugh Campbell Adamson, of the Salmon & Trout Association (Scotland) [S&TAS], said: "We would ask ministers again to consider ordering a cull of all the fish in the very worst affected farms. This is the decisive action taken by the Norwegian authorities when they were faced with a similar problem – and the fallowing of these farms until such time as a proven solution is identified. The question remains whether ministers are prepared to provide any protection whatsoever for wild salmon and sea trout in the worst affected regions."

Guy Linley-Adams, solicitor to the S&TAS, said that farm-specific sea-lice data should be published so that the problem fishfarms can be identified.

YELL FISHFARM ESCAPE

The *BBC News* website reported that 154,569 salmon were lost from the Ness of Copister site on the island of Yell, Shetland during severe storms this winter. Meridian Salmon said that there were over 364,000 fish on the farm; fish from three of the cages were safely removed.

STOCKING SALMON RIVERS

A new review of stocking policy by the Rivers & Fisheries Trusts of Scotland (RAFTS) of the practice of artificial stocking of salmon rivers has been published. It concluded emphatically that there should be 'a general presumption against stocking of salmon', as the practice is an inefficient method of boosting catches. A comprehensive body of scientific evidence, both national and international, was examined, leading to the consensus view that 'enhancement stocking is largely ineffective and potentially harmful.'

Brian Davidson, of RAFTS, said: "Since the 19th century, salmon stocking has been routinely carried out in the belief that it improves fish numbers. Only recently, in the last two decades, has the practice been subjected to proper scrutiny. The evidence is now overwhelming that in most circumstances, far from being a panacea, salmon stocking makes no discernible difference to salmon numbers and often may actually be detrimental.

"An extensive study on the River Spey has demonstrated that the hatchery made an annual contribution to the rod catch of between zero and 1.8% in any given year. Adult fish have to be removed from the wild to generate eggs and subsequently juveniles and that these fish would probably have spawned in any case. When account is taken of this, any apparent minor 'benefit' of the hatchery may well be outweighed by the reduction in natural spawning and juvenile production, with survival rates for the latter likely to be higher than those achieved by hatchery reared fish. Apart from the removal of fish which would otherwise have spawned naturally, other negative impacts include restocking eggs and fry in places where the adults would not have naturally spawned; and issues

associated with the mixing up of different fish from different parts of a system which can dilute or change natural population structures.”

RAFTS' general presumption against stocking of salmon applies except in very specific circumstances – such as where there has been significant habitat loss or there are insurmountable challenges. Thus, in contrast to enhancement stocking, the RAFTS review acknowledges that 'mitigation stocking' (to compensate for lost production due to a man-made scheme, such as a hydro-power dam, or activity that cannot be prevented or removed) or 'restoration stocking' (for example, where a population has been lost) may well be appropriate within defined parameters.

See: forargyll.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2014/03/RAFTS-Policy-statement-on-stocking-of-Atlantic-salmon-in-Scotland-2014.pdf; forargyll.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2014/03/RAFTS-Stocking-Policy-Technical-paper-2014.pdf

YTHAN ESTUARY

The Scottish Wild Salmon Company has acquired angling and salmon netting rights in the Ythan estuary and adjacent foreshore on Aberdeenshire coast.

The company said that one of its first actions would be to use non-lethal methods to divert the estimated 500 seals around the estuary, which should benefit salmon numbers for everyone on the river. It would also encourage public angling where it has the rights.

Bob Dey, of the Aberdeen & District Angling Association, said: “We are totally dismayed these nets are due to start operating again. Our association has extensive fishing rights on the River Ythan – it is a working man's river, available to all our members in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. It is galling that all our [conservation] efforts are jeopardised by the arrival of a major salmon netting company, which has never paid a penny towards conservation on the Ythan and has a history of catching as many fish as possible for commercial gain ... The Scottish Government has woefully failed to introduce legislation to cease the practice of coastal netting for Atlantic salmon and sea trout.”

Salmon caught by rods cannot be legally sold, unlike those netted, and Mr Dey said that Scottish ministers had to decide whether supplying wild salmon to elite restaurants was more important than ensuring the future of an iconic species in rivers such as the Ythan.

RAZOR CLAMS

The Herald reported that 815 kg of razor clams, illegally harvested in waters around Barra, were intercepted at Oban ferry terminal. The catch, worth about £40,000 and en-route for Hong Kong, has been destroyed. The operation involved Argyll & Bute Council, the Food Standards Agency, Marine Scotland and Police Scotland.

NORTH SEA QUOTAS

An agreement between the European Union, Norway and the Faroe Islands on North Sea fishing quotas has finally been reached for whitefish stocks such as cod, haddock, whiting and saithe [Jan 14]. Scottish fishermen will be able to catch up to 210,000 tonnes of mackerel per year. Talks over quotas have been going on since Iceland and the Faroe Islands unilaterally increased the size of their catches in 2010; Iceland has not signed up to the new agreement.

The Faroe Islands will receive 12.6% of the total allowable catch of mackerel, and the EU and Norway will share 71.8% on the basis of their current agreement. A further 15.6% has been set aside for Icelandic and Russian catches.

Scotland's catch makes up around 42% of the total EU quota. Scottish cod quotas are also to increase by 5% and Scottish boats can access Norwegian waters with immediate effect.

Bertie Armstrong, of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, said: “[This deal] also brings forward the likelihood of Scottish whitefish boats gaining access to Faroese waters, which has been denied to them for the past four years because of the mackerel dispute.”

Simon Collins, of Shetland Fishermen's Association, which represents one third of Britain's pelagic vessels, said: “Quite simply, this deal has rewarded Faroese piracy – and fishermen in Shetland are disgusted with the size of the reward. The fact is that a vastly reduced quota share seriously compromises the outlook for future generations, as the mackerel stock could contract as well as expand in the course of its natural cycle.”

• The Scottish allocation of mackerel quota for inshore fishing will be increased by 1,000 tonnes in 2014, following a consultation [Sep 13]. The total quota is now 1,300 tonnes for vessels under ten metres and will form part of a two-year trial.



MARINE

SEA CHANGE PROJECT

The Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust (HWDT) has been awarded £120,000 through the UK government's Coastal Communities Fund [see POLITICS below]. The Sea Change project will be launched in 15 island communities across the Hebrides to promote the conservation of whales, dolphins, porpoises and basking sharks and the region's appeal as a major destination for sustainable marine wildlife eco-tourism developed.

A new full-time Sightings & Strandings officer will be appointed by HWDT to train volunteers, organise school visits and support the community-based hubs on the islands, which will then run the project from their own community. The officer will also liaise with boat operators, local people and tourists on reporting marine animal sightings and strandings.

A new visitor centre manager will ensure that HWDT's headquarters in Tobermory becomes the project base and a community resource for learning, training and volunteering.

SPERM WHALES

Two sperm whales were seen at the mouth of the Camus Mor by Kilmuir, Skye. Dr Peter Evans, of the Sea Watch Foundation, believes that the appearance by the pair may be due to warmer sea temperatures. He said: “In past decades, most records of sperm whales in British waters have been of lone adult males around Scotland mainly around the Northern Isles and the Hebrides. Increasingly, however, adolescent males have occurred in our waters, sometimes in groups of five to ten. Sightings of sperm whales have tended to occur mainly in summer so this sighting is notable not just for the time of year but for its inshore location.”

SEAL PETITION

The Save Our Seals Fund has launched an official petition to the Scottish Parliament, calling for marine salmon farms to be forced to install and maintain predator exclusion nets or brought on shore into enclosed tank systems which also eliminate the problem of sea-lice infestation. The Scottish Government has licensed the killing of up to 1,005 seals in 2014. The petition closes on 5 May. See: www.scottish.parliament.uk/gettinginvolved/petitions/sealshooting



POLITICS & PARLIAMENT

DEER MANAGEMENT

The Scottish Government has acknowledged that deer, in some areas, are damaging Scotland's natural heritage, and that more needs to be done to quantify the impacts outwith protected sites [Feb 14]. The Scottish Government supports the Rural Affairs committee view that the pace and progress of developing plans by some deer management groups has been too slow and the minister supports the proposed 2016 deadline.

Dr Maggie Keegan, of Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), said: “The SWT believes that because of inaction by some, Scotland's natural heritage, such as peatlands, native woodlands and many internationally important sites, has paid the price. SWT recognises that we shouldn't get too hung up by focussing on total deer numbers, rather we should be ensuring that across Scotland, deer are managed locally in a way that strikes the right balance between private sporting interests and the public interest which includes protecting Scotland's natural capital for all and supporting the rural economy.

“SWT hopes that the key concerns which have emerged from the committee's enquiry into deer management are accounted for in the review of Scotland's national deer strategy to ensure that Scotland's wild deer are part of flourishing, ecologically functional living landscape.”

See: www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_RuralAffairsClimateChangeandEnvironmentCommittee/General%20Documents/2014.02.06_-_Convener_to_Minister_deer_letter.pdf; www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_RuralAffairsClimateChangeandEnvironmentCommittee/General%20Documents/2014.03.05_-_Ministers_response_on_Deer_Management.pdf

PAIRC ESTATE

Ballot papers were due to be sent out to the crofting community on the Pairc Estate on Lewis after terms of a voluntary transfer of the estate to the community were negotiated between the Pairc Trust and landowner Barry Lomas, who had originally been unwilling to sell [Dec 13]. However, it proved impossible to finalise the documentation by the due date and the ballot was been called off. Discussions are ongoing with the estate.

Angus McDowall, chairman of the trust, said: “If it is not possible to resolve the issues, we will have to abandon the Amicable Estate Transfer route and rely on the Courts to determine the outcome of our applications to buy the Estate under Part Three of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act.”

CROWN ESTATE

The Herald reported that the UK Scottish Affairs committee published a second report on the Crown Estate and called for reform of the role of the commissioners [Jul 12]. The committee said that the Crown Estate still managed most of the foreshore and seabed in Scotland but were running it ‘for the benefit of the UK Treasury.’

Ian Davidson MP said: “We remain convinced that the transfer of these assets from an over-centralised London to an over-centralising Edinburgh would not be sufficient, and that local people and local authorities should be given primacy in determining how these assets should be developed and how financial benefits should be distributed.”

• The Labour Party has published plans for the devolution of the Crown Estate's rights and responsibilities as part of a package for greater powers for the Scottish Parliament, but with a view that they are further centralised to community and local level and will not sit in Edinburgh.

• The UK Treasury announced that Crown Estate marine revenues are to finance £14m of support for community projects in Scotland in the latest round of awards from the Coastal Communities Fund (see MARINE above, and RECREATION & TOURISM below) [Aug 12].

LAND REFORM

The Herald reported that the House of Commons Scottish Affairs committee has called on the Scottish and UK governments to give priority to improving information to the public about land ownership in Scotland. The interim report also said that Scottish landowners may face an end to all tax exemptions, subsidies and ‘cosy tax deals’ unless they are shown to be in the public interest.

Ian Davidson MP said that no government with any pretensions to land reform could avoid the need for clear information on its existing ownership patterns to be widely available. He said: “This must include beneficial ownership, to prevent owners hiding behind front companies, trusts or in tax havens.” He said that government policy on inheritance tax, business property relief, agricultural property subsidies, and non-domestic rates helped to preserve inherited wealth in landed estates. The increase in the price of land is never taxed, even when it is inherited; this is driving up prices and used to preserve inherited wealth. Inheritance tax on land would probably be introduced in bands, with exemptions at lower levels.

Douglas Adam, of Scottish Land & Estates, said: “Public interest is exactly why these incentives have been put in place by successive governments. We do not believe there is a culture of secrecy in terms of land ownership in Scotland.”

Scott Walker, of NFU Scotland, said: “The suggestion being put forward by the Scottish Affairs committee of radical changes to the existing tax regime has the potential to destroy family farming units ... land prices have become largely disconnected from the returns that can be made from agricultural activity.”

The Herald reported that estate agents CKD Galbraith warned of ‘deep concern’ over right-to-buy proposals aimed at promoting community ownership.

The firm said: “It is not in Scotland’s interests – and especially those communities in fragile rural economies – to create an impression for political purposes where people willing to invest are somehow considered undesirable.” It said that, while interest in Scottish rural estates remains relatively healthy despite the independence referendum, the proposed legislation on land reform, which will be introduced post-referendum and before the next elections in 2016, is having an impact on estate owners and their land-based business activities.

Beth Hocking, of Savills in Scotland, said: “Scottish Land Reform was meant to establish a fairer land ownership structure in Scotland. But a proliferation of land policy reviews over recent years has created a climate of uncertainty and confusion, which is potentially stifling investment by landowners in fragile rural communities. What the rural sector needs now is cohesion and confidence.”

Robert McCulloch, of Strutt & Parker, said: “Such is the limelight that the independence referendum is attracting that the potentially more damaging limiting factor in this market sector – the forthcoming recommendations of the Land Reform Review Group – is being occluded.”

RADIOACTIVITY

The environment secretary, Richard Lochhead, has announced the Scottish Government’s intention to bring forward proposals to remove the Ministry of Defence (MoD)’s environmental exemption on radioactivity. The Crown exemption – ‘a historic anomaly’ – means that at present, regulation of the environment in regard to radioactivity, within the areas of the MOD’s establishments in Scotland, is not subject to regulation by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA). At present, SEPA can only provide regulation under a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ with the MOD, but lack the powers they have in every other part of Scotland.

In a radioactive incident, reported this month at the UK government’s Vulcan Nuclear Reactor Test Establishment at Dounreay, this meant that SEPA only had full authority for the vicinity of the Vulcan establishment – not within it. It also means that SEPA has no power to enforce the MoD to take action where there are concerns.

Mr Lochhead told the Scottish Parliament: “The Radioactive Substances Act 1993 is an anomaly. Other environmental protection legislation has no similar Crown exemption, and there is no good reason that radioactive substances should be treated any differently from other risks to the environment.”

• *The Sunday Herald* reported that the MoD has submitted plans for the Faslane naval dockyard to increase the amount of radioactive waste discharged into the Gareloch. The number of UK nuclear submarines, based at Faslane and Coulport near Helensburgh, is to rise from five to 14 by 2019. The waste comes from the submarines’ reactors and includes radioactive cobalt-60 and tritium.

SEPA said that, under the proposed voluntary letters of agreement with the MoD, high discharge limits for radioactive waste from Faslane and Coulport would come down. However, the actual discharges would increase as the number of submarines rose.

The MoD also wants to keep emitting tritium gas into the atmosphere from the nuclear weapons stored at Coulport. Annual emissions of tritium have doubled between 2008 and 2012, and are expected to rise with the introduction of upgraded warhead designs.

Proposals to move some submarine work to Coulport will also mean radioactive waste being transported by road between the two bases.

The MoD said that all discharges would be within authorised limits. SEPA is under pressure to delay giving the go-ahead to the increases until it has been given the new statutory powers promised by the Scottish Government [see above]. SEPA should then set legally enforceable limits for discharges.

The Scottish Government plans to send all 14 nuclear-powered submarines, not just those equipped with nuclear warheads, back to England if Scotland votes for independence in September.

PLANNING FRAMEWORK

The National Planning Framework (NPF), updated every five years, sets out how Scotland should develop over the next 20-30 years. The Scottish Government must take the views of parliament into account before publishing the final document, which is expected to be in June this year. Four separate parliamentary committees have considered the draft; all welcomed the production of the framework but also had some strong recommendations for government.

The Rural Affairs, Climate Change & Environment committee called for issues including flood risk management, peatland

protection and restoration, the delivery of zero waste, support for low carbon patterns of development and the development of a low carbon heat networks all to be strengthened. It also called on the Scottish Government to consider extending the timescales for future parliamentary scrutiny to a minimum of 90 sitting days, acknowledging that some interested parties had struggled in the tightly proscribed timescale of 60 days. The committee also encouraged the Scottish Government to reflect on the scope to include a National Ecological Network as a national development in the final NPF3, highlighting the government’s existing commitments to biodiversity.

The *BBC News* website reported that Murdo Fraser MSP, the committee convenor, said: “The committee was disappointed not to be able to fully scrutinise the key policies that will underpin our planning system, particularly controversial issues such as the future siting of onshore windfarms and unconventional onshore oil and gas extraction. Scotland deserves a transparent and consistent policy that provides clarity for planners, developers and communities.

“The lack of clarity on how the Core Areas Wild Land Map is to be used, together with ambiguity on the separation distance between communities and wind farms, is causing uncertainty in the renewable energy industry and in communities where windfarms could be located. If Scotland is to stay on track to meet its challenging renewable energy targets then this must be urgently addressed.”

The Scottish Government has proposed increasing the separation distance between windfarms and local communities from 2 km to 2.5 km. The committee asked: “Whether the separation distance is to be applied as a fixed boundary or whether flexibility can be applied by local planning authorities depending on the scale, size and number of wind turbines, the impact on topography and the levels of community support.”

MSPs welcomed plans to establish similar buffer zones for onshore oil and gas extraction sites, along with a commitment from ministers to consider whether the application processes for unconventional gas extraction and the use of hydraulic fracturing fully involve the communities where the extraction could take place.

The framework and the Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) on important land use refer to the Core Areas of Wild Land Map produced by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) [Jan 14]. In its report, the committee said that consultations on how the map was to be used should have been completed before the MSPs began scrutiny as the timing of the consultations had hindered the ability to scrutinise ‘the balance between economic development and protecting wild land.’

The Local Government & Regeneration committee called for better links to other key national policies and for the involvement of the parliament at an earlier stage in the preparation of the framework.

The Energy committee requested that the framework provide greater clarity on planning rules for onshore windfarms and for unconventional gas (including fracking).

The Infrastructure & Capital Investment committee urged caution in the airport enhancement works proposed by NPF3 given the greenhouse gas emission this will cause and for improved clarity on a number of transport issues, including high speed rail, port development and sustainable transport.

A Scottish Government spokesman said: “The Scottish Government welcomes the positive approach taken by the four committees considering the proposed NPF3 and the SPP. We agree that NPF3 has a key role to play in bringing together Scottish government policies to provide a clear, long-

term spatial plan for growth. These connections are already strong – a wide range of policies have informed the proposed NPF3. The planning process has a key role to play in ensuring all types of development are balanced with the needs of communities and quality of the environment. We are taking an evidence-based approach to our policy on unconventional gas and wind energy development, and will make our intentions clear in the finalised SPP.”

WILD LAND

The Scottish Government consulted in 2013 on the main issues report for NPF3 and draft SPP. A policy approach was proposed that referred to the SNH Core Areas of Wild Land 2013 map. A number of energy companies asked that it be put out to public consultation. SNH was asked to provide further advice to ministers on this map [Dec 13].

A total of 410 submissions were received, with 300 supporting the wild land map. An analysis of the responses carried out by two independent organisations, Craigforth Consultants and Planning Aid Scotland, has now been published. Its key findings are that 73% ‘generally support’ the wild land map; 21% ‘oppose or raise substantial concerns’ about the map and 7% are ‘unclear or have no view.’

A further breakdown of the data reveals that 86% of individuals responding support the map, while 12% oppose it; 72% of third-sector organisations support the map, while 17% oppose it and 53% of local authorities support the map, while 20% oppose it. Although energy companies opposed the map, non-energy businesses, especially in tourism, were in favour.

Stuart Brooks, of the John Muir Trust (JMT), said: “The energy companies who demanded this consultation now have to accept their views are in the minority. In fact, there were more submissions calling for the wild land map to be extended rather than reduced. The sensible, middle way forward now is for the Scottish Government to accept the wild land map as it is, and incorporate it into the new National Planning Framework and planning policies now under discussion.”

The Herald reported that Storas Uibhist, which manages the 93,000 acre South Uist Estate on behalf of the community, said that the interim report on the Wild Land consultation submissions released by the Scottish Government ‘has been seized on by some organisations to claim there is overwhelming support from the public to extend the deemed areas of wild land.’

They said that close inspection of the submissions reveals the main representative organisations of the people who live and work in most of the areas deemed to be wild land had serious concerns about the proposals, and indeed the areas, that SNH identified in a desk exercise.

The Highland Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council), Community Energy Scotland, Community Land Scotland, Scottish Crofting Federation and the Crofting Commission all have serious misgivings about the map.

A Storas Uibhist spokesman said: “These organisations represent the many thousands of people who live within, or adjacent to, the supposed ‘wild land’ and their views should not be ignored or disparaged by single-interest lobby groups, the majority of whose membership almost certainly live nowhere near the ‘wild land.’ Much of the supposed wild land has been inhabited, cultivated, altered and managed for centuries.”

Storas Uibhist and other crofting and community-led bodies are concerned the map will lead to a Wild Land environmental designation that would prevent future development.

Western Isles Council said: “We believe local authorities are best placed to determine the final areas that should be included in development plans taking account of specific local circumstances, and the policy on wild land should be set locally.”

In its submission, the Crofting Commission said people like crofters, who have worked Scotland’s remote rural landscapes for generations were ‘rendered invisible by the wild land map.’

The Herald reported that the Knoydart Foundation said that it shreds the desires of many visitors to protect what is often described as the last true wilderness in Britain. The foundation said: “However, it appears the designation of ‘wild land’ is essentially about the perception of those from outwith the area and pays no heed of the views or perceptions of those people who live and work there.”

John Hutchison of the JMT said that the wild land map was not a designation. He said: “It is about offering a degree of protection to precious landscapes that sustain thousands of livelihoods in remote communities, and ending the unregulated free-for-all that allows multinational energy companies and big private landowners – who own the vast bulk of Scotland’s wild land – to ravage a valuable national asset for profit.”

A spokesman for SNH said: “The wild land map does not propose a designation nor does it suggest creating no-go areas. It maps areas with strong wild land character so those making decisions about how these areas are managed in future are aware and can take account of the wild land.”

- David Stewart MSP has put down a motion in the Scottish Parliament in support of wild land for which he will be seeking cross-party support.

- Following a debate in parliament on wild land, the JMT welcomed cross-party support for the final document to explicitly recognise the value of Scotland’s wildest landscapes. MSPs agreed that it would be appropriate to include a phrase along the lines of “the government wishes to continue strong protection for our wildest landscapes.” This phrase had been in the original draft document which was sent out to public consultation, but had been removed from the most recent version.

In reply to the debate, Derek Mackay, the minister for planning, said that while the detailed wild land map should be included in planning guidance, it also made sense to include a reference to wild land in the NPF3.

Following the debate, Helen McDade, of JMT, said: “It’s heartening to see a consensus among our politicians that wild land should be protected as part of Scotland’s unique natural heritage. It is especially encouraging that the minister has said that final decisions would be evidence-based, and that the government had been waiting for the independent analysis of the recent SNH consultation on the Core Areas of Wild Land map.

“That analysis has now been published and reveals overwhelming support for wild land protection among all groups apart from energy companies. Unless the industry is able to exert undue influence on Scottish planning policy over the next few months, then it looks likely that the importance of wild land will be spelled out in the final NPF3.”

See: www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A1184205.pdf, www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A1218449.pdf



GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

WILD LAND

The Mountaineering Council of Scotland (MCofS) polled almost 1,000 mountaineers and hill walkers and found that 68% believe parts of Scotland are now less appealing. Around two-thirds questioned by the MCofS said they had already been put off from visiting or revisiting places in Scotland. More than 80% of respondents said there had to be protection for national parks, National Scenic Areas and core areas of wild land.

Two-thirds wanted buffer zones so developers would not be able to place industrial-scale wind farms around their perimeters. Meanwhile, 67% said windfarms were making Scotland as a whole a less appealing place to visit.

David Gibson, of MCofS, said that the survey was a warning to the Scottish Government that badly sited windfarms were a threat to Scotland’s reputation as a tourism destination. He said: “Many of the windfarms planned for Scotland’s most remote and beautiful areas have yet to be built and the evidence from this, and other surveys, suggests that visitors dislike them more and more as they cease to be a novelty. It is deeply disturbing that the renewables lobby is using all its influence to push the Scottish Government into abandoning proposals that would give some protection to one of Scotland’s greatest natural assets.”

Joss Blamire, of Scottish Renewables, said: “What [the] survey shows is that, even within the hill walking community, opinions about the aesthetics of windfarms are wide-ranging. In fact, some large scale projects are now attractions in their own right, from the hydro power stations in Cruachan and Pitlochry to the windfarm at Whitelee near Glasgow.”

WILDFIRE FORUM

The *BBC News* website reported that the Scottish Wildfire Forum has been re-formed and ‘re-energised.’ The forum includes firefighters and land managers. The organisation has also formed a new working group of senior fire officers to help guide the best ways of controlling wildfires in the hills. The fire service’s assistant chief officer Robert Scott heads up the forum.

MUIRBURN

The Independent reported that the RSPB has warned that grouse shooting is ruining the countryside in Scotland (and parts of England), as upland peatlands are burned to provide the optimum conditions for commercial red grouse. In the UK, 77,000 hectares of upland peatland has been badly damaged muirburn so far, with a marked acceleration in the rate in the past 15 years as grouse shooting has become more popular.

The East Highland Glens are the most affected by the burning in Scotland, which has widespread repercussions for local wildlife as well as climate change and floods. Many hectares of this wetland have been drained with ‘ill-advised’ government incentives to improve grazing conditions in the 1950s and 1960s, in part to help grouse populations; although this practice is rare nowadays the effects of the drains cut into the hill can last for up to 50 years. Vegetation is burnt on a ten to 25 year rotation, creating a mosaic of areas of differently-aged heather; grouse prefer to eat heather less than ten years old and to nest in the older heather. However, this damages wildlife such as dunlin, sundew and sphagnum mosses, while the burning on deep peat also releases the carbon stored in the land and increases the risk of flooding.

A spokesperson for the Moorland Association

said: "Burning remains a vital tool to protect the hugely valued moorland landscapes from the increasing threat of wildfire and to provide food for sheep and grouse, which in turn fuel the local economy in these remote areas."

REST & BE THANKFUL

Transport Scotland is seeking a long-term solution to the problem of recurrent landslips on the A83 between Loch Fyne and Loch Long and is working with Forestry Commission (FC) Scotland and local landowners to develop a strategy.

Syd House, of FC Scotland, said: "The Alpine countries have long recognised the importance of protection forestry. That is woodland established to protect villages and communities from land slippages and avalanches. They manage the forests simply to protect the asset. It is exactly that principle we are talking about for the A83. Hard engineering, netting, clearing rock faces are being looked at by Transport Scotland.

"However, tree planting would contribute to the long-term solution. We are talking about something that will help stabilise the slopes over the next 20,30, 50 years, indeed in perpetuity. It wouldn't be commercial conifer forestry because that would involve taking the trees off at some point. Nor would it involve heavy ploughing or drainage.

"We are talking light touch. We are talking about native species and those that are particularly good at binding such as hazel, willow, hawthorn, aspen alder, birch, maybe oak. The deeper the roots, the more they can bind the soil. The initial project would be about 247 acres, planting about 2,500 *per* hectare, so about 250,000 trees."

He said that land grazed by livestock such as sheep over centuries leads to compaction of the soil. The top 6 inches could be wet, then after that it is quite dry. This leads to the water coming off the surface more rapidly, rather than soaking downwards, thereby contributing to landslips. Trees would help the ground to act like a sponge.

SQUIRRELS

Scottish Wildlife Trust is collecting information on the distribution of red and grey squirrels across Scotland. This will allow the identification of areas of importance where habitat management or grey squirrel control will benefit red squirrel populations, and also to understand natural changes in their populations. The data will be shared with local biological records centres and the national database of squirrel records. Report sightings in each new place where they are seen on: www.scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk/what-we-do/scotlands-red-squirrels/squirrel-sightings

AN CAMAS MÒR

The Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) has granted planning permission in principal for the An Camas Mòr 1,500 house development near Aviemore [Aug 13].

Eleanor Mackintosh, convenor of the park authority's planning committee, said: "The concept of An Camas Mòr is about creating a new sustainable community within the Cairngorms National Park over the next 20-30 years with homes, community facilities and work places all reflecting this special location."

The authority has said it believes the project will ensure sufficient housing in an area where local provision is an issue. However, the Badenoch & Strathspey Conservation Group, the Cairngorms Campaign and the Scottish Campaign for National Parks have lodged an appeal with the UK Supreme Court after losing an earlier legal challenge against the development.

Duncan Bryden, the CNPA's convenor, said: "In the Cairngorms – Britain's largest National Park – many of our much-treasured villages are 19th century planned settlements. An Camas Mòr should be another real living and working settlement for the 21st century that also respects its setting within the National Park. The phasing of the An Camas Mòr project will let the community grow sustainably over time."

DRAIN LADDERS

Friends of Angus Herpetofauna has been given permission by Angus Council to place 37 ladders in drains at two sites in Dundee and Carnoustie, to allow frogs, toads and newts to escape.

Trevor Rose, of Friends of Angus Herpetofauna, said: "Hundreds of thousands of amphibians die a slow, lingering death in gulleypots every year in the UK. It is hoped, if the ladders are proved to be a successful solution, that they could be fitted to gulleypots everywhere and provide amphibians with a fighting chance of escape, and help to halt the decline their ever-falling numbers."

WILDLIFE CRIME

The Scottish Government has launched a consultation on extending the investigative authority of Scottish SPCA inspectors. Under the proposals, inspectors would be able to investigate crimes relating to wild birds, other protected animals, poaching, snaring and non-native species of animals. Those investigations could involve accessing land and premises, searching for evidence and seizing any evidence found. Access to dwellings and locked buildings would be granted by warrant only.

The SSPCA could investigate situations where animals were not in distress, such as checking illegal traps where no animal is present or an animal is already dead. The consultation finishes on 1 September. See: www.scotland.gov.uk/consultations

RAPTOR PERSECUTION DATASET

The number of reported, and confirmed, illegal bird of prey poisoning incidents in Scotland has increased to six in 2013 from three in 2012. The birds involved were a red kite, a golden eagle and four buzzards.

Maps have been published by the Partnership for Action against Wildlife Crime (PAW) Scotland which show, for the first time, not only poisonings but all recorded crimes against birds of prey.

There were 15 recorded crimes involving other methods of persecution such as shooting, trapping or nest destruction. Two further incidents could not be included on the map as their location was not known. The birds involved included red kites, hen harriers, buzzards, an osprey, a sea eagle, a peregrine falcon and a tawny owl.

PROSECUTIONS

A father and son from Lanarkshire have been convicted of badger baiting under the Protection of Badgers Act at Hamilton Sheriff Court, following an investigation by the Scottish SPCA.

- The *Raptor Persecution Scotland* website reported that the trial of a Scottish gamekeeper ended at Stirling Sheriff Court with a verdict of 'not proven.' The case centred on the discovery of a Larsen trap, containing a tawny owl, on the Duntreath Estate in 2012. A jay was, allegedly, being used in the trap as a lure for birds of prey; it is not permitted under general licence to use a jay as a decoy within a Larsen trap.

RAPTOR KILLINGS

The *BBC News* website reported that Police Scotland has launched an investigation following the discovery of ten dead red kites within a 2 km²

area near Conon Bridge, Easter Ross. Ross-shire. Four dead buzzards were also found; some of the cases have been confirmed as poisonings.

RSPB Scotland is offering a £5,000 reward for any information that leads to a successful conviction.

AIR POLLUTION

The Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (CHE) in Edinburgh is using backpacks, fitted with particle monitors and GPS, to study personal exposure to air pollution. Air pollution is routinely measured by a network of urban monitors at fixed locations across Scotland; however, these are unable to provide a detailed picture of an individual's exposure throughout the day.

Dr Stefan Reis, of CHE, said that the development of mobile, smart air pollution monitoring equipment will be cheaper and more effective than investing in a larger network of fixed monitoring stations to cover whole cities.

Environment minister, Paul Wheelhouse, said: "Working in partnership with local authorities, we've developed a network of monitoring sites, there's over 90 of them in Scotland, and we're using those to develop our strategy at a local level. In some cases, where they fail to meet the Scottish standard, which is a tough standard, they identify an air quality management area and that then triggers between the Scottish Government and the local authority, who have a duty to deliver good air quality locally, to tackle that."

GREENHOUSE GASES

The UK's Committee on Climate Change (CCC) reported that greenhouse gas emissions in Scotland fell by 9.9% in 2011. Much of the reduction was due to the weather and a switch from coal-fired electricity generation to nuclear and renewable sources.

The CCC said the reduction also reflected good progress investing in renewable energy and energy efficiency, however it said more must be done in order to meet future targets.

There were decreases of more than 20% in the power and residential sectors, and a 15% reduction in emissions in the public sector. Despite the fall in emissions, Scotland narrowly missed the legislated annual target of 53.4 million tonnes carbon dioxide equivalent (MtCO_{2e}). The CCC said this was due to a change in the way estimated emissions were calculated.

The committee's latest report highlighted several areas that will require further action in order to meet future targets, including pilot projects for new farming practices.

MIDGE FORECAST

Dr Alison Blackwell, of Edinburgh University, said that the relatively mild winter and warm spring weather following torrential rain provides perfect conditions for midges to thrive after hatching.

She said that the wildfires in the Highlands and Islands last year would have little effect on midge numbers.

NATIONAL BIRD

Written advice from the environment minister, Paul Wheelhouse, was submitted to the Petitions Committee concerning the adoption of the golden eagle as the National Bird of Scotland [Feb 14].

Mr Wheelhouse recognised the continued persecution that this species faces and is 'not opposed to the idea of the golden eagle as a national bird. I do think, however, that, if we were to designate the golden eagle as Scotland's national bird, we would be in danger of pre-judging the view of the people of Scotland, and that the Scottish Parliament might wish to reflect on the value, purpose and means of choosing further national symbols ... I am not yet convinced that there are compelling arguments in support of having a national bird."

Mr Wheelhouse has, however, endorsed the recent designation of the Scots pine as Scotland's national tree [see WOODLANDS].

See: www.raptorpersecutionscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/wheelhouse-response-to-petition-1500-mar-13-2014.pdf

FLOOD PROTECTION SCHEMES

Two flood protection schemes in Brechin, Angus and Selkirk in the Borders are being awarded almost £40m of Scottish Government funding. The government is also contributing £500,000 towards the cost of repairing damage to river banks, sea walls and coastal paths caused by severe tides and flooding in Dumfries & Galloway earlier this year.

CENTRAL SCOTLAND GREENSPACE

Six projects across the central belt are to share in £242,695 of funding that will improve access to high quality greenspace for local people. The projects are focussed on areas of deprivation and transforming derelict land for the benefit of the community.

The projects, supported through the Central Scotland Green Network (CSGN) development fund, are based in Glasgow, Fife, Ayrshire and Falkirk [Sep 13].

CLIMATE CHANGE

The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report has been published, which supports growing evidence that climate change is having an impact on some of Scotland's species and habitats.

RSPB Scotland said that coastal habitats and wildlife are already suffering from the rising sea levels, extreme weather and warming oceans highlighted in the report. It is thought that climate change is behind a steep decline in the number of kittiwakes breeding in Scotland. The overall population has decreased by 68%, rising to as much as 91% in some parts of Orkney. Warmer sea temperatures are affecting the abundance and quality of their main source of food – sand eels – weakening the birds and making it harder for them to successfully raise their chicks. Further change could be catastrophic for kittiwakes, and it is feared that the species could become extinct in the area unless urgent action is taken.

The IPCC report singles out Scotland's rare machair grassland as one of the habitats most at risk from climate change. Machair is unique to the British Isles and 70% is located in western Scotland, but many parts are suffering from erosion and could be further damaged by rising sea levels and flooding.

The machair on Tiree erodes by half a metre each year, a loss of vital habitat for a wide variety of wildlife including corncrake, ringed plover and the great yellow bumblebee. Climate change is also having an impact further inland on species such as the dotterel, a bird that breeds only on the highest mountain tops. Almost two-thirds of the UK population are found in the Cairngorms but breeding males decreased from 630 in 1999 to 423 in 2011. Changes in temperature could force the birds further uphill, shrinking their habitats and leaving them with less food to eat.

 **ENERGY**

RENEWABLES

The UK Department of Energy & Climate Change reported that Scotland produced 46.5% of Scotland's energy from renewable sources in 2013. Renewable power projects produced a total of 17,011 Gigawatt hours (GWh) of electricity in

2013, a rise of 16.4%. Wind power produced a total of 11,216 GWh of electricity last year – a 35.7% increase on 2012.

TRANSMISSION CHARGES

The BBC News website reported that Ofgem has said that the decrease in the charges that electricity generators in Scotland pay to the national grid has again been delayed. A second round of consultation with the industry about Project TransmiT, the review of electricity transmission charging arrangements, has been announced. Critics of the charging system have said it is holding back development of renewable energy projects in the Highlands [Dec 13].

Fergus Ewing, the energy minister, said: "I am extremely disappointed in Ofgem's decision to delay yet again the introduction of measures to tackle the long term discrimination against Scottish electricity generators. In April 2008 the first minister and representatives of Scotland's electricity industry met with Ofgem and presented an unanswerable case for transmission charging reform. It is unacceptable that there is still no change almost six years after widespread political consensus on the need for reform was reached."

WINDFARM POLICY

The Sunday Herald reported that the Scottish Countryside Alliance has produced a manifesto which lays out the group's position on several rural issues, including onshore windfarms. The alliance takes a more supportive stance on wind energy than previously, but has not come up with a 'blanket campaign to promote windfarms' although it does call for more government support. The alliance is pro-renewables but has a caveat that windfarms need to be 'the right ones in the right area.'

A Scotland Against Spin spokeswoman said: "Some large landowners see windfarms as not just a get-rich-quick scheme but a subsidy cow to beat all subsidy cows. This has nothing to do with looking after our landscape, wildlife and environment, or ensuring the future viability of rural communities. Instead it means permanently degraded landscapes and ecologies."

WINDFARM UPDATES

Argyll: The Sunday Herald reported that Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) said that RWE Innogy's 15 turbine Ardchnonnell windfarm above Loch Awe would have 'significant adverse impacts' on local villages and the skyline, spoiling the countryside 'for residents and visitors alike.' It also said that the development is out of scale with the surrounding landscape and that the proposal is 'not in keeping' with local windfarm advice, nor Scottish planning policy.

The area is used by six rare bird species (golden eagle, red-throated diver, white-tailed eagle, osprey, merlin and peregrine falcon); the development would 'contribute to the degradation' of bird habitats in Argyll. The development is on an estate owned by Sir Jamie McGrigor MSP.

Borders: Councillors opposed Muirhall Energy's 24 turbine Girthgate windfarm, between Lauder and Stow, on visual and amenity impact grounds. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) also lodged an objection because of the effects on seismological readings at Eskdalemuir; Forestry Commission Scotland and SNH also had reservations.

Dumfries & Galloway: The BBC News website reported that 50 community councils have called for a moratorium on planning consent for windfarms in their region. They have written to the Scottish Government and to the local authority, saying that a map produced by SNH shows that

southern Scotland has more onshore windfarm developments operational or proposed than any other part of the country. Cumulatively, they could have a 'profound impact on the landscape and wildlife.'

The community councils asked for more time, and resources, to consider the applications. A statement from the local authority said: "We will consider the issue but we are aware that the Scottish Government has rejected previous similar requests."

- The council is to lodge a formal objection to Wind Prospect's plans for a 24 turbine windfarm on moorland at Stranoch, near New Luce. There are concerns about the cumulative impact of the development.

Western Isles: The MoD has launched a judicial review at the Court of Session, challenging Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's decision to grant three separate crofters planning permission to build wind turbines; two turbines at Bornish and one at Frobost on South Uist. The MoD said that a proliferation of wind turbines in a localised area could interfere with air defence radar.

MORAY FIRTH WINDFARM

The Scottish Government has given approval for an offshore windfarm development in the Outer Moray Firth off the Caithness coast [Jun 13]. The two neighbouring projects, from Moray Offshore Renewables Limited and Beatrice Offshore Windfarm Limited, involve a total of 326 turbines and will be capable of generating up to 1,866 MW of electricity. The combined development will be the world's third biggest offshore windfarm.

The consents are granted subject to strict conditions which will mitigate and monitor a range of potential impacts, including in relation to birds and other environmental considerations. The developers have to undertake local, regional, and strategic bird monitoring and have to comply with a number of plans such as the Environmental Management plan and the Operation & Maintenance programme to ensure that effective mitigation takes place.

The Herald reported that Aedán Smith, of RSPB Scotland, said: "It is disappointing Scottish ministers have decided to take such a risk with Scotland's internationally important populations of seabirds. We will be looking closely at the details of the consent but we believe a smaller development could have provided very significant amounts of renewable energy with much less risk to marine wildlife."

Bertie Armstrong, of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, said fishermen would have preferred no such large-scale interference from turbines, but added: "Accepting that such developments are going to happen over the coming years, it is absolutely essential the fishing industry continues to be fully consulted during the complicated planning and licensing processes so the impact of offshore renewables on fishing is mitigated."

SSE has announced that it will seek to reduce its 75% stake in the 750 MW Beatrice project to no more than 50%.

ISLAY ARRAY

The ForArgyll.com website reported that SSE had proposed to develop a 690 MW offshore windfarm off the coast of Islay in Argyll and while it will continue to work with other stakeholders in relation to the development, it will not be investing further in the project in the foreseeable future. The company cites the Levy Control Framework as a major hurdle, which means there is limited support for offshore wind. A second is the cost – the future of offshore windfarm development depends on a sustainable and lower cost supply chain.

CALLANDER HYDRO

Callander Community Hydro Ltd has received funding of £1.9m for a hydro scheme on Forestry Commission land. It will be Scotland's first community developed and wholly owned hydro scheme.

UNCONVENTIONAL GAS

The Sunday Herald reported that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) said that a flawed and potentially leaky gas borehole was planned at Deerdykes, Cumbernauld close to exploratory water-wells dug by the makers of Irn-Bru, AG Barr, and the sausage skin manufacturer, Devro. The borehole would have been lined with cement only down to 100 metres and risked contaminating the test water wells.

However, both firms said they were no longer planning to use water from the wells. The Deerdykes gas borehole had not been drilled as planned, and had now been granted a licence aimed at ensuring it would protect human health. The developer, Reach Coal Seam Gas, said it had changed the design of the borehole to follow industry best practice guidelines.

The report also found 'poor borehole construction' at Canonbie, in Dumfriesshire. Four gas boreholes in Canonbie lacked cement lining between 100m and 400m, potentially allowing contamination of an aquifer. SEPA said that it had toughened its regulations, and is requiring current owner, Dart Energy, to take remedial action. Dart is to plug, abandon and reinstate the wells.

The internal report, released under freedom of information legislation, said that there is a high risk of water pollution from deep borehole drilling for underground gas. It said that vertical and horizontal drilling for gas down to 2,500m poses a greater danger of pollution than boreholes for water, which are mostly less than 100m deep, it argues. Deep saline waters can contaminate more drinkable upper aquifers if the borehole is not adequately constructed. The report also points out that fracking fluids, which could be used to help extract methane, must not be allowed to leak into other parts of the groundwater system. No fracking, the hydraulic fracturing of underground rock, is currently proposed in Scotland.

RSPB Scotland, along with Scottish Environment LINK, called on the Scottish Government to take a cautious approach to any extraction of unconventional gas in Scotland, with a presumption against extraction until concerns about environmental and climate impacts have been properly addressed.

- A public inquiry took place for the UK's first commercial drilling for coalbed methane in the Forth valley. Dart Energy has outlined plans to drill 22 wells at Letham Moss near Airth; the development is on the boundary of Falkirk and Stirling Councils. More than 2,500 people have lodged objections to the proposals.

ENERGY-FROM-WASTE

The Sunday Herald reported that Rank Recycling Scotland has taken over Scotgen's Dargavel energy-from-waste plant in Dumfries and is applying for a permit to restart and operate it. Scotgen had its operating permit withdrawn after hundreds of toxic pollution breaches [Aug 13].

Critics fear that allowing the new firm to take over the incinerator from its defunct predecessor is an 'abuse of process' and are demanding that the new permit application be toughly scrutinised by SEPA. SEPA said that it would expect to see a robust demonstration that any recommissioned or proposed plant can comply with all legislative pollution control requirements.



RECREATION & TOURISM

SPEYSIDE WAY

Planning permission has been granted by the Cairngorms National Park Authority for several short, key sections of extension to the Speyside Way long distance footpath [Dec 13].

It was first opened in 1981 to run from Spey Bay to Ballindalloch and was extended over the years to reach Aviemore in 2000. The route is currently 65 miles long but the plan is to extend it to Newtonmore about 15 miles to the south. The whole route is expected to take around three to five years to complete and cost around £2m.

Permission has been given for 0.75 miles of new path and stock fencing south of the Highland Main Line railway opposite the Dalraddy Holiday Park, three miles south of Aviemore; 1.18 miles of new path south east of the Highland main line on the Kinrara Estate; half a mile of path east of the Loch Insh outdoor centre at the village of Kinraig; and over 200 yards of new path over the Allt Dibheach burn, near Aviemore.

Major Robin McLaren, of Kinrara Estate, is taking legal advice on the decision; he asked for a site meeting on the estate to point out an alternative route to councillors, but was out-voted.

ARRAN COASTAL WAY

The Arran Banner reported that £170,000 has been awarded by the Coastal Communities Fund to develop the 100 kilometre Arran Coastal Way (see POLITICS above) [Mar 03]. North Ayrshire Council, Visit Arran (Arran Trust) and Forestry Commission Scotland have also contributed funding to the project, overseen by the Arran Access Trust. This will enable the appointment of a project coordinator and a footpath team to undertake work over two years. Sections of the footpath will be improved and signage and interpretation updated. See: www.coastalway.co.uk

ULVA FERRY PONTOON

A grant of £451,000 from the Coastal Communities Fund has been pledged to the Mull & Iona Community Trust to pay for a pontoon at Ulva Ferry, in north-west Mull. This will allow berths for visiting yachts, ferries, tour operators and fishermen. The facility is scheduled to open at the start of the 2015 season. Planning is also under way to secure funding for a facilities building.

- An additional sum of £100,000 from the Coastal Communities Fund will provide up to 28 moorings along the North Ayrshire coastline.

LOCH NESS

Inverness and Loch Ness are set to form the UK's first Tourism Business Improvement District. Local businesses will work together to boost tourist numbers and improve the visitor experience.

Two projects have already identified; the completion of a trail on the south side of Loch Ness and the removal of trees which block views of the loch from roadside lay-bys.

LOCH LOMOND

The Herald reported that Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority, which banned camping in unauthorised areas on its eastern banks between Drymen and Rowardennan in 2011, said that it had seen a large drop in reports of vandalism, violence, littering and fires in the nine-mile stretch since the measures were brought in.

In a report to the Scottish Government on the operation of the legislation over the past three years, the park said that the by-law had contributed to a radically improved visitor experience in the

area. The wild camping restrictions, which can see offenders fined up to £500 during the six months of the year they are in place, were part of a package of measures that also included an alcohol ban.

The national park is now set to embark on a review of visitor management options for other popular locations, and will bring forward proposals that are likely to include new legislation in other problem areas where education campaigns have failed.

Jackie Baillie MSP said that Luss especially, on the west of Loch Lomond, had seen problems in recent years and that the by-laws in the east may have increased pressures on other parts of the park.

Ramblers Scotland said that it would oppose any proposals to extend a camping ban, and accused the National Park of renegeing on a pledge, made in 2011, to repeal the existing by-laws if they proved a success.

Dave Morris, of Ramblers Scotland, said that the park's report to the Scottish Government was fundamentally flawed and argued that more use of the by-laws would set a precedent that could lead to rights being restricted across the country. He said: "They introduced the camping by-laws at the same time as introducing the alcohol prohibition. Now, the situation is much better but we don't know whether it's due to alcohol, which was obviously a major issue. It's a fundamental part of the Land Reform Act, and a fundamental part of our tradition, to be able to camp in areas like Loch Lomond and other areas of Scotland without hindrance."

Just one report has been made to the procurator fiscal as a result of the by-law being breached, with those found to be illegally camping initially asked to move on.

Views are being sought from communities, landowners, visitors, recreation groups, interested parties and national bodies on the extent of these park-wide issues and possible solutions for each area.



NEWS OF ORGANISATIONS

SWT

The Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) has appointed Jonathan Hughes as chief executive with immediate effect.

- SWT has launched a new volunteering programme, Scottish Wildlife Volunteers, as part of its 50th anniversary celebrations. The People's Postcode Lottery Volunteer Training Fund has also been established so that Scottish Wildlife Volunteers can be nominated to undertake training that will increase their skills.

TREES FOR LIFE

Trees for Life is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. It is marking the occasion by extending the geographical range of its forest restoration activity from its previous project area near Loch Ness, and is exploring opportunities to restore neglected and derelict Caledonian pinewoods in other parts of Scotland. A new tree planting project will begin in a Caledonian pinewood remnant at Culligran in Glen Strathfarrar in the autumn.

A 300 hectare commercial plantation of non-native trees, planted by a previous owner on the Dundreggan Conservation Estate, is being restored back to native woodland. A mire restoration scheme, funded by a grant from Scottish Natural Heritage, will be undertaken over ten years. A programme of research on forest ecology will also be carried out at Dundreggan. A woodland link will be created between Glen Affric and Glenmoriston.

See: www.treesforlife.org.uk